



Venezuela Relief

Story by SPC Carrie L. Fotovich

Two soldiers of the 1st Bn., 228th Avn. Regt., look on as a CH-47 attempts to lift a boat stranded during floods in the Catia La Mar region of Venezuela.

SPC Michael Fraas

TOWNSPEOPLE shielded their eyes from the sun as they watched the CH-47 helicopter land at a makeshift helipad in their coastal village northwest of Caracas, Venezuela, which had just weeks earlier been devastated by floods and mudslides.

Villagers and Venezuelan soldiers unloaded aid supplies ranging from baby formula and diapers to food and personal hygiene items. Even children pitched in, loading cans of potable water, as much as they could carry,

and dropping them off at the growing hill of aid supplies.

With the supplies delivered, the pilots and crew of the helicopter, from 1st Battalion, 228nd Aviation Regiment, stationed at Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, took on their next mission. A Venezuelan soldier in the village had been badly hurt and needed emergency medical attention. The soldier was loaded onto the aircraft and flown to a waiting ambulance.

After returning to base for reloading, the helicopter flew out again to distribute supplies to several other towns hit hard by the floods.

“Because the United States has



Venezuelan National Guardsmen and medics remove a casualty from an Army CH-47 of Co. K, 159th Avn. Regt.

such good equipment and the soldiers and pilots are so well-trained, we’ve been able to accomplish a great deal,” said Venezuelan army Capt. Sammy Herrera, who worked with the U.S. military on the disaster-relief missions that were part of Operation Fundamental Response. “If the United States

SPC Carrie L. Fotovich is assigned to Forces Command’s 14th Public Affairs Detachment. SPC Adam Thornton and SPC Zach Mott also contributed to this article.



The U.S. troops sent to Venezuela found a region devastated by floods and mudslides.



A Venezuelan soldier loads a truck with supplies brought in aboard a CH-47 belonging to the Honduras-based 1st Bn., 228th Avn. Regt.

wasn't here helping us, our mission would be far more difficult."

At the beginning of the operation, in December, the battalion concentrated on rescuing or transporting refugees from the most endangered areas and bringing them to safer ground. Later, the missions changed to delivering food and water to remote villages and transporting those in need of medical attention.

Many roads were blocked by mudslides, making the helicopters a welcome sight to villagers and relief workers alike.

"It seems like the people in every village are happy to see us. They smile and shake our hands, pat us on the back and thank us," said SPC Bryon Brown, a CH-47 crew chief. "It feels great to know we're going out to help

people. That's one of the reasons I joined the Army. It really makes it all worthwhile."

Helicopters were the most visible sign of the Army's aid, but other units brought equally needed support.

Helping to answer requests for potable water, the Puerto Rico Army National Guard's 219th Quartermaster Detachment arrived with reverse-

osmosis water purification units and immediately went to work converting sea water to drinking water.

The ROWPUs desalinated 2,000 gallons per hour, eventually providing about 75 percent of the potable water delivered to the state of Vargas during the most critical period of the disaster, said SPC Carlos Colon, a 219th water-treatment specialist. The 219th also supplied water to the states of Zulia and Anzotegui.

To coordinate for movement of supplies, commanders relied on the 235th Signal Company from Fort Gordon, Ga.

The 235th took over communications responsibilities from Special Operations Command, South, which had set up interim signal support immediately after the floods struck.

"We're doing the same job they were doing, we just brought more beefed-up equipment," said 1LT Brad Rhodes, the officer in charge of the tactical satellite team.

Many people lost loved ones, homes, cars and pets as a result of the torrential downpours. Though it will take many of the areas years to recover from the damage, the Army's relief efforts have brought the villagers closer to a more normal life.

"Each time we fly out to the towns, they seem to get a little better," said crew chief SSG Walter Crockett. "The most rewarding thing is seeing the kids smile. They've seen more than we could imagine, and to give the little ones hope and bring them a smile makes us smile too." □

